



Charlotte Mason's House of Education,
Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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A TRIO OF REMBRANDT'S PICTURES.

THE collection of Rembrandt's paintings, numbering as many as 102, now to be seen in the galleries of Burlington House, and the notices thereof in all the leading papers, recall to some of us the never-to-be-forgotten hours when we first stood before the masterpieces of the greatest of the painters of the later days, if not the greatest of the painting craft of all time.

If we group together the half-dozen or dozen of those we may term the world painters, the order of the members composing that group will differ, of course, with the predilections of the grouper; but in each group will be found two or three of the northern painters; the earliest of them all, the originator of the mixing of colours with oil, whose great picture, the oldest oil painting in the world, is yet matchless, must be found there, as well as the latest, the soul-painter Rembrandt, whose most powerful work seems to have the least amount of subject: no story to tell, no great scheme of design, no pageant of colour, just a portrayal of an individuality of an unremarkable type. This had scarcely been achieved before, to put on canvas the mind and intelligence of the common-place countenance of the man in the street. In this respect I know not who shall come second after Rembrandt—Raphael has left portraits incomparable for beauty, delicacy, and character, such as the Cardinal Passarini in the Naples gallery; Lorenzo Lotto did grave quiet work, but beauty was always in the subject of it; Velasquez portrayed a peculiar type in the most powerful manner—but one must journey to Amsterdam and stand in the Ryks Museum before the Guild picture of the Cloth-workers, otherwise called the Syndics, to realize how much of interest and charm is discoverable in the common-place. It is just a group of ordinary youngish or middle-aged men, whose dark clothes and hats stand out against a harmonious plain green background, unrelieved by any extraordinary

effect of light or shade, evenly diffused daylight in a room where the wide white collars and the faces unheightened by any gleam make the strongest lights. The elements of the picture could not be simpler, but how much is made out of how little; it is here as everywhere in art, the manner not the matter that tells, and the manner is so consummate that it obliterates itself and we see it not at all, but only look straight through it, as through perfect glass absolutely invisible, to that which the master-mind of the manner chooses that we shall see. We may try to describe the manner of resolute set purpose, but it eludes us and we fail—the better a thing is done, the less can we say how.

In this same Ryks Museum at Amsterdam, is the more celebrated picture known as the "Night Watch," or the "Midnight Round," a large painting some fourteen feet by eleven, of full length figures with accessories and attractions of many sorts, dress, colour, strong light and movement. It is happily hung close to the ground facing the long gallery, up which one advances to this the central spot of interest in a building that is replete with interest. The effect of position is striking extremely, the two foremost figures of the picture leaving the guard-house, walking with energy and swing, advance to meet us as we come along that vista leading up to them, at the far side of the great Rembrandt room; the first distant view is most fascinating, and fills us with a thrill of expectation and pleasure as we approach slowly, not to lose any of the long drawn-out seconds of that first vision, and so slacken pace unconsciously, till we stand in full sight of the whole scene. Then one is somewhat overwhelmed, there is so much to see, to understand, to admire, a whole symphony of colour! I was constrained to traverse that approach once more to look at those vigorous forms with intent to notice how they held their own with the almost less real people walking to and fro in their vicinity. I desired to find some note of difference between the reality and the counterfeit presentment, other than the inevitable one of costume, and it was unmistakably there, in the golden hue and glow in which this master delighted to enshrine his figures—yet! did he do it of intention? Is it more than mellowing varnish, which alone to distant vision distinguishes paint from life? I went there yet again on a darker day, when the gallery

was almost empty, and stronger than before in the invisible pause that the picture is considered so; to describe it in detail leave it undescribed; many devices of vivid pictures not come first or second paintings that makes a picture-lover.

May I note how many at all, but year after year enchanted land of art—only is another, there is a new art, like the northern race form? beginning earlier production of the three later without sign of decay or later still through his much less than fell the from his perfection!

The third of the great last, but which is not less. It is unfortunate for its people; the so-called "portrait group, and was in Amsterdam, to be hurried anatomist of his day stands facing us, lecturing a human arm; half a follow his discourse with looking out of the picture his left hand is raised expression of his eyes, one to expect the coming hear that which is so keen and the intently listening, supremest portraiture of induced; but its force is a who have not been within who stand in that quiet

was almost empty, and found the effect of life and movement stronger than before in the arrested step, with its perfectly invisible pause that has lasted about 250 years. This picture is considered Rembrandt's masterpiece, and justly so; to describe it in detail would take many words and still leave it undescribed; it has many details, many charms, many devices of vivid portrayal; yet to some of us it does not come first or second in the great trio of Rembrandt paintings that makes a visit to Holland an epoch to the picture-lover.

May I note how many picture-lovers never go to Holland at all, but year after year to Italy, which is most truly an enchanted land of art—of its own southern form of art. There is another, there is a northern art! and is not the northern art, like the northern race from which it sprang, the stronger form? beginning earlier its completed manner in the first production of the three Van Eycks at Ghent, and lasting later without sign of decadence, till Rembrandt died in 1669, or later still through his school, who fell below him how much less than fell the followers of the perfect Raphael from his perfection!

The third of the great Dutch pictures, which I have left last, but which is not least, is in the gallery at the Hague. It is unfortunate for its fame that its subject repels many people; the so-called "School of Anatomy" is likewise a portrait group, and was painted for the Guild of Surgeons in Amsterdam, to be hung in their dissecting room. In it a noted anatomist of his day, who was a friend of Rembrandt's, stands facing us, lecturing and explaining the structure of a human arm; half a dozen men immediately about him follow his discourse with varying degrees of interest; he is looking out of the picture to an audience in front of him, his left hand is raised in a gesture of explanation, the expression of his eyes, the attitude of every feature, lead one to expect the coming words; one positively longs to hear that which is so keenly interesting the speaker himself, and the intently listening faces around. This is surely the supremest portraiture of the working intelligence ever produced; but its force is absolutely incommunicable to those who have not been within the spell of its influence. Some who stand in that quiet room and wait, half unwittingly, for

the words to follow the depicted thought, half wondering at the new sensation that has come to them, who examine the concentration differently depicted on each different face, only to turn back again and again to the speaker's literally speaking countenance, must see, feel, and realize, that Rembrandt is the mind painter, the painter of humanity at one of the highest points yet achieved by our race. The giving and receiving of ideas is here made visible to us.

There is much else in this picture; there is design, colour, tone, light and shade, all so perfect of their kind that we pass them over unnoticed, and all of them dominated by the forcible expression of knowledge given to the fine countenance of a master mind among teachers. The foreground, the subject of dissection, repellent to some natures, to others is almost invisible; one looks at it and finds nothing to see, there is no suggestion in it but emptiness! one glances away again immediately and involuntarily to the fuller surroundings, and so travels back again by any one of many roads that all converge upon the one centre.

S. A.

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